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## THE EIGHTH PSALM: AN INTERPRETATION.

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By PROFESSOR GEORGE A. BARTON, PH.D.,  
Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pa.

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O Jehovah, our Lord,  
How glorious is thy name in all the earth!  
Thou, who hast set thy glory above the heavens,  
From the mouths of babes and sucklings hast founded a stronghold,  
Because of thine enemies,  
To silence the foe and the vengeful.

When I behold thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,  
The moon and the stars which thou hast ordained,  
What is man that thou art mindful of him,  
And the son of the earthborn that thou visitest him!  
Thou hast made him little less than divine,  
Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor!  
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands,  
Everything thou hast put under his feet—  
All sheep and oxen,  
Also cattle of the field,  
Birds of heaven, and fishes of the sea,  
That which travels the paths of the seas.

O Jehovah, our Lord,  
How glorious is thy name in all the earth!

THIS psalm of praise comes from a hopeful period of the post-exilic times. One may say this with confidence, for there is in vss. 6-8 evident adaptation of both the language and the thought of the P document in the first chapter of Genesis. It is probable, too, that the psalm was composed at a comparatively early date after the exile, for in the judgment of several commentators this passage is parodied in Job 7:17. We cannot date the psalm definitely; our information does not permit it. The strain of praise with which it opens points to a time of success against odds in the face of foes and adversaries. On the whole, the general period of the governorship of Nehemiah suggests itself as the most probable date.

The psalm is one of those which celebrate the work of God (1) in his dealings with Israel, and (2) in the works of nature and the creation of man. To understand the inspiring thought of the psalm as it appealed to the devout Israelite of that period, these two aspects of the topic should be considered:

1. The dealings of God with Israel. Israel, in comparison with her great neighbors of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates valleys, was a tiny nation. They were giants; Israel, a mere babe in comparison. One of these giants had led Israel into captivity, had destroyed her capital, and had desolated her sanctuary; but God had raised up the Persian—a giant to destroy the older giants. The Persian had reversed the old Assyrio-Babylonian policy of transportation, and had inaugurated an era of toleration. Israel, though reduced to a tithe of her former numbers, had been permitted to return and rebuild her temple, to restore the walls of Jerusalem her capital, and to revive her national institutions. Our psalmist, like the second Isaiah, regarded this as the result of God's control of human history. Cyrus and the Persians were the creatures of Yahweh. Edomite and Samaritan had organized their venomous opposition; nevertheless, the good work had gone forward. The "foe and vengeful," whether Egyptian, Babylonian, Edomite, or Samaritan, had been put to silence. The faith uttered by those who appeared to be earth's weakest had proved an impregnable stronghold. This experience of the nation revived the psalmist's faith in the triumph of the right. It had been demonstrated, he thought, that permanent victory does not perch upon the banner of the strongest battalions. Might does not make right. The giant of blood and iron cannot conquer the idealist. A God rules in heaven. The tyrant may seem to prosper, but the "stars in their courses fight against" him. It may seem that

Truth's forever on the scaffold,  
Wrong forever on the throne;  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
And behind the dim unknown  
Standeth God within the shadow  
Keeping watch above his own.

This, the psalmist would say, Israel's history has proved. The

praises of the weakest, under present circumstances, silence the strongest and most vengeful foe.

2. All that the psalmist has said is true, but as he gazes heavenward in the brilliancy of a Palestinian night the marvel that it should be true bursts upon his understanding. There are the heavens, so vast, so high, so blue; there are the brilliant sun, the beautiful moon, and the countless stars. God must be greater than all these, for he is their Creator. In comparison with them how puny a creature is man! But if man is less than the least of the works of the sky, how small must he be in comparison with the Maker of the heavenly orbs of light! Yet God actually thinks of man. More than this: earth-born though man is, God has given him a great destiny. In thought and power he has made man little less than divine; in function he has made him a god upon earth. Man rules God's works. Domestic animal and wild, quadrupeds and fishes, the birds of the air and the mysterious forms which the sea may conceal—all are under man's dominion! Man holds over them a scepter which God has placed in his hands. To them man is a god. These reflections give the psalmist a new and an exalted view of the dignity of human life. Higher than all other forms of life and dominant over them, man holds, when viewed from below, a noble and an enviable position. When viewed from above, too, his position is not less honorable. The everlasting Creator thinks upon him; the Almighty visits him; in intelligence he resembles his Maker; in aspiration he reaches after him; in spirit he communes with him. Such a view of man's place in the universe inspired him who wrote and those who sang this psalm to more earnest endeavors to live worthily, to exercise justly their God-given functions, and to approach more nearly the divine standard.

Logically, the second part of the psalm should come first. The voices of nature urge all men on to a noble life. Unfortunately all do not heed the persuasive accents of these voices. The difficulties created by human strife, violence, and selfishness are so great that the mere consciousness of a high calling is too often not enough to keep one faithfully on the pathway of virtue and of duty. A glimpse of the laws of righteousness as they have manifested themselves in human life, and an experience of the fidelity of God in making the

right to triumph, are needed to enable one to realize the destiny toward which he is urged by the vision of man's place in nature.

The psalmist has, however, followed the order of experience. In some great deliverance one is awakened to a sense of God's goodness; he learns the beauty of holiness; he is convinced of the inviolability of righteousness; he learns by experience that God dwells, not with the proud and vain-glorious, but with him who is meek and of a contrite spirit. Then, and only then, is one sufficiently at leisure from himself to appreciate the sublime incentives and inspiring impressions which are afforded by the contemplation of the heavens, or of the cosmic life about him.

Such was the meaning of this psalm more than two thousand years ago. Modern discoveries in natural science, the greatly expanded historical horizon of the present day, and the clearer knowledge of God brought to us by the Son of man, only emphasize its truths and render them more impressive.



"THE TEMPTATION."

—Ary Scheffer.